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Sauquoit Creek Basin Intermunicipal Commission

by

Roger A. Cleveland, Chairman

The Sauquoit Creek Basin Intermunicipal Commission had its roots in 1999 as a Steering Committee formed by former Oneida County Executive Ralph Eannace. A proposed flood mitigation project in the lower reaches of Sauquoit Creek by the Army Corps of Engineers was rejected by both the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and the local sponsor, the Town of Whitestown. DEC responded with an offer of, if the local communities within the Sauquoit Creek Watershed would form a legal entity, then matching funds would be made available for flood mitigation projects approved by the DEC.

The Steering Committee consisted of six communities including the Towns of New Hartford and Whitestown, and the Villages of New York Mills, New Hartford, Yorkville and Whitesboro. We worked on trying to figure out what kind of entity we should become, obtaining a Federal Tax ID number, preparing and getting approved all the necessary Intermunicipal Agreements, and attending meetings with the basin's neighboring communities trying to bring them into the fold. Just because a community's population isn't impacted by flooding doesn't mean they don't contribute to the problem. Water runs downhill. And that flooding affects the area's economy and businesses. Some people who live in the upper reaches of the watershed no doubt work in businesses in the flood plane, and if those businesses are flooded, those people can't work. We also worked on trying to get answers from DEC on exactly what was going to be required by them for project selection and approval, and doing all these things with primarily a group of chief elected officials who had full time jobs. These were all activities that took several years to achieve.

In 2004, the original six municipalities became a legal entity through Intermunicipal Agreement, and shortly thereafter, a Commission. We then worked with DEC to acquire an Article 15 Permit for the lower one-mile of Sauquoit Creek, between Oriskany Blvd. and the railroad bridge adjacent to the Sauquoit Creek Pump Station in Yorkville. This allowed us to perform limited gravel removal at select locations, and to apply for other flood mitigation projects. Our problem wasn't the lack of desire to do additional work – we had already identified over \$3 million dollars in proposed projects. Rather, it was the lack of up-front funding. With the promised 50-50 match in funding, the rules were that the Commission had to upfront the entire cost at the beginning of the project, and then be reimbursed by DEC.

In 2006, a situation arose that allowed us to do our first bricks and mortar project. A severe embankment erosion situation was identified at Pietryka Park, in the Village of New York Mills. This exposed embankment allowed for the continued erosion of gravel into the stream, which, as it moved downstream, reduced the flow area of the stream

channel and set the land areas abutting the stream up for increased flooding. In addition, the eroded stream bank was approaching a high-pressure gas main. While doing site investigation it was discovered that there was an exposed sewer line in the same, exact area that the Commission's project was located. Partnering with the County to simultaneously repair the sewer line, we approached then Oneida County Executive Joe Griffo and the County Legislature, and they agreed to be our bank, up-fronting the initial monies and then receiving reimbursement from DEC for their portion of the work. An extension to the Article 15 Permit was acquired encompassing the stream reach from Commercial Dr. to Chenango Rd. The work was done in the early fall of 2006, and per our engineer's inspection this month, the project functioned as designed during the late fall and winter storms.

The Commission is doing another project this year, this time along Oneida Street in the vicinity of Hand Place. During the summer, the Sauquoit Creek stream bank was discovered to have eroded to within several feet of Oneida St. And it so happened that the Town also discovered a manhole at this same location, that from either the ice or debris in the stream had dislodged the frame and cover, allowing for millions of gallons of water to enter the sewer during high stream flow conditions. This was immediately corrected, but the manhole and attached sewer line remains precariously located in the direct path of the stream flow and needs to be protected.

With the possible funding match from DEC, the Town agreed to let the Commission be the Town's agent, and the Commission has progressed the project to the point of Construction. I say possible funding because although DEC has approved the project, and the Commission has gone through all the procedures that were required for the Pietryka Park project, including the acquisition of another extension to the Article 15 Permit, DEC is having problems delivering on the funding, a matter we hope to have cleared up in the spring with a new State budget. Regardless, the project needs to be constructed, and constructed this year, and we are proceeding with that effort.

If the funding matter is resolved, the Commission is looking to possibly partner with the NYS Department of Transportation on another project near Oriskany Blvd., and to further extend our Article 15 Permit to encompass the area from just south of Oriskany Blvd. to Commercial Dr. and along Mud Creek, the primary tributary to the Sauquoit Creek. We know that there are more projects that can and should be done, but unless and until the Commission can find up-front money sources outside of just the Commission's municipalities, we will be limited in what we can tackle. The Commission will also be holding a spring 2008 clean up of the Creek, and build on ours and other organization's past clean-up efforts. More information will be made available to the public in late winter on this effort.

DEC has touted the Commission's accomplishments across the State as an example of what can be achieved when various levels of government work in concert. We hope to be able to report back to you next year that we continue as a viable organization, one that continues to have as its mission, the stewardship for future generations of this valuable resource.